

**State of the City Address**  
**John F. Morrissey, Mayor**  
**St. Marys, Georgia Town Hall Meeting**  
**January 22, 2020**

We are entering not just a new year, but a new decade. While the occasion serves as an opportunity to reflect on the past, it more importantly offers opportunities to look ahead with renewed enthusiasm and optimism. As we begin 2020, the word that keeps coming to mind is “**Momentum**”. While 2019 brought closure to several projects it also created a positive momentum to carry us into 2020.

Yes, major construction and renovations were a challenge to many and a major inconvenience to some, but the waterfront enhancements bring a fresh and inviting look to downtown. The Osborne Street improvements are well underway and on schedule. The expanded boat docks are finally open for the enjoyment of residents and visitors alike. Private investors have joined in to upgrade several businesses in downtown, midtown and on the west side.

Early indicators signal that JDA has recruited a respected and accomplished national developer to purchase the former mill site with plans to repurpose the property in a way we can all embrace. With all this momentum, developers are expressing interest for the first time in the former airport property as they witness a renewed **momentum** in St. Marys.

There is an increase in permits for new residential and retail businesses. I am encouraged that many ventures are being led by a new generation of business leaders. They include some who were born and raised here and some who moved here, fell in love with our city and made a decision to invest. These investments signal much needed rebirth in all sectors of our city.

Our revitalized Senior Center underwent a major change with revamped program offerings and services resulting in a doubling and often tripling of daily participation with new members joining every

week. New leadership has re-energized our police force and creative ways to protect and serve are emerging. Our commitment to collaborate with service groups and local businesses to sponsor popular festivals and events results in drawing record numbers to the city. A major financial investment at the Kings Bay Naval Base is so significant that it will result in hundreds of new neighbors resulting in an increased market for housing and service providers. Neighbors that I hope we will welcome with open arms. **Momentum!**

In the last four years, we decided not to “wait and see”. We made conscious decisions to be pro-active. We have not been afraid to lead. We have not been reluctant to make changes whether staffing changes, policy changes or operational changes. We have not hesitated to look to the future as well as the present. We remain committed to fiscal responsibility and accountability of taxpayer funds, but are also aggressive in seeking grants, several in the multi million dollar ranges, to help finance many of the projects in our Master Plan designed to improve our city infrastructure and protect our residents and businesses.

I remember well the 2008 recession and how long it took Camden County to recover and note that many small rural communities in Georgia never did recover. In the span of just thirteen months in 2017, St. Marys was negatively impacted by two hurricanes, Matthew and Irma. To all of us recovery seemed to take forever but we did recover. We rebuilt stronger and better. We persevered, always looking forward and not backwards.

Those memories are a great reminder that national and local economies have cycles and the best time to keep moving is when we are in an up economy. For us that **momentum** really took hold in 2019 and we need to take full advantage while we can in 2020.

But we cannot afford to look at just 2020. We have no choice but to look further ahead. As just one example, whether you believe in the climate change argument or not, the facts are clear. Coastal communities from Miami to Charlestown and beyond are feeling the impact of more high tides, more flooding, and ever-increasing vulnerability.

Just a couple of weeks ago, the well-known national television program 60 Minutes aired a feature about future flooding. It began by reviewing the historic Venice, Italy canal floods earlier this year and went on to pinpoint scientists' predictions that what were once considered hundred year floods could now become annual events. The cities specifically identified in the feature were Key West, Miami and Jacksonville, Florida and Savannah, Georgia. We are obviously in that geographic zone of concern. It is yet one more reason we have to think towards the future.

What will St. Marys look like in 5 years or 10 or beyond? What do we need to do to protect homes, business, livelihood and our way of life? How do we prepare? What must we do as elected leaders now to lay the foundation for those who follow us?

Our response cannot be about "the sky is falling...woe is me" scenarios. Our response must be positive and pro-active. It must be aggressive while remaining thoughtful, fair and respectful of differing views. Whether dealing with the perils of rising tides and waters, opportunities for economic development or delivering expected city services to citizens, positive and pro-active steps are essential. It is about building up this city we love; not tearing it down. It is about finding viable solutions; not wallowing in complaints. It is about all of us viewing our great city as One St. Marys. It is doing so with civility, respect, and hospitality towards neighbors and visitors alike. That message is essential for city officials and staff and critical for citizens as well.

We are a diverse community. We have a variety of great neighborhoods each as unique as the residents who proudly call them home. But in the end, we all have a St. Marys address. We are One St. Marys.

We have different views and opinions but I am encouraged that so many have recently jumped on the positive action bandwagon rather than just citing concerns or complaints. It is that "can do" spirit that will fuel our continued momentum. Some of you know that I sometimes express frustration with the rumors, gossip and misinformation that can dominate local social media. But I am beginning to see an increase in positive and supportive comments

about our city. More people are praising our attributes. I am encouraged.

As state and local experts in economic development keep telling us, businesses looking to expand or relocate check social media just like they do other data points to determine whether the target city is ideal for their business. Anyone who uses social media can be a key player in contributing to the positive message that St. Marys is on the move. While there are always things city government can do better, I remain convinced that focusing on the positive is the best path to create a climate for success.

Last year I closed my state of the city address by quoting from the city's Master Plan adopted two years ago. The citizens who developed that plan interviewed hundreds of St. Marys residents and business owners, the majority of whom expressed a strong desire to be One St. Marys, not a divided St. Marys. The vision and values the volunteer Committee put forth were officially adopted by City Council and have been the basis for our actions. They are well worth repeating as we enter a new decade.

One St. Marys. One Vision. One Future.

We value:

- Our people
- Our small town ambiance
- Our peaceful and safe environment

We respect:

- Our rivers, marshes, wildlife and coastal environment
- Our diversity and individual differences
- Our rich history

We envision a St. Marys where:

- All lives are respected;
- All voices are heard;
- All families can thrive;
- All neighborhoods are vibrant and inviting;
- All individuals have adequate economic opportunities;
- All businesses have the opportunity to prosper.

It is by accepting those values and that vision that I charge myself, the Council, the city staff, and appointees to Boards and Authorities to undertake challenges and opportunities in 2020 with renewed enthusiasm and positivity. We have the **momentum**. We have a window of opportunity. Let us join forces to keep that momentum rolling in 2020!